

# Emerging in Seattle: Ray Bakke and a school without walls

by [Jason Byassee](#) in the [February 24, 2009](#) issue

*As a pastor in Chicago and a teacher at Northern Baptist Theological Seminary and McCormick Theological Seminary, Ray Bakke encouraged pastors to engage the city rather than flee from it. He cofounded the Chicago-based Seminary Consortium for Urban Pastoral Education (SCUPE), one of the nation's major centers for reflection on urban ministry, and he served as senior associate for large cities with the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelism from 1979 to 1995. Bakke's books *A Theology as Big as the City* (Inter Varsity Press) and *Street Signs: A New Direction in Urban Ministry* (New Hope) reflect his effort to reorient theological education and ministry to focus on urban realities and God's vision for the city.*

*In recent years he has sought to institute those changes himself at Bakke Graduate University in Seattle, formerly known as Northwest Graduate School of Ministry. In 2001 he was invited to be its chancellor. (In 2005 the school changed its name in honor of Ray Bakke and his brother Dennis, a founder of the grant-making Mustard Seed Foundation, a member of the BGU board and a leader in providing financial support for the school.) BGU has almost no overhead or brick-and-mortar costs. It seeks to use the world's great cities as its classrooms and to develop a new model of theological education.*

**For years you were associated with the city of Chicago. Now you are in the Pacific Northwest. How does this region serve as a site for a new kind of theological education?**

Chicago is the perfect lab for urban ministry and theological reflection. The lessons I learned there in pastoring and teaching resonated with the pastors and mission leaders I met in conferences and seminars all over the world. Chicago is the classic industrial city—and, increasingly, postindustrial city.

Seattle, by contrast, is the consummate Pacific Rim platform, as is the whole Cascadia region from Vancouver to Portland and California. The U.S. is slowly

shifting its focus from the Atlantic to the Pacific. Microsoft, Starbucks, REI, Amazon and even the new sports teams reflect that shift. The pastors whom I got to know in the late 1980s in East Asian rim cities had that “deer in the headlights” look: hugely growing cities intimidated them, and their classical theological education had not prepared them for that experience.

### **How did Bakke Graduate University come into being?**

In 2001, the chancellor of Northwest Graduate School asked us to take over that school. We moved the school downtown, changed its name, and have since run it from First Presbyterian Church. We wanted to have a part in long-term economic development in the poorest cities of the world—in the global South especially. We filed for university status. We are launching an M.A. program in civic and social entrepreneurship, along with an M.B.A. program.

We expect to have close to 500 students this year—more than half of them in our doctoral program, whose students do most of their work in major cities in about 40 countries.

We have faculty who teach in French, as well as a program based in Montreal that is carried out in some 15 francophone countries. We have a Hong Kong office for work there and one in China. We expect to add Spanish and Portuguese offices.

Only about 4 percent of the world’s people live in the U.S. So it’s possible to be a leader in the U.S. context and still not know about what is going on with 96 percent of God’s world. Sixty percent of the world live in Asia, and 40 percent live in two Asian countries, so we are heavily involved there. One of our required two-week intensive courses takes place in either India or China.

### **Do lessons learned in such places transfer easily to other places?**

We dare not assume that the way urban churches, mission programs or NGOs function in one setting transfers to another setting, given the fact of geographic, historical, cultural, religious and social pluralism and the kaleidoscopic rates of urban change. However, the tool kits for emotionally intelligent leaders are similar in different settings. Vision, which is by my definition a holy discontent with things as they are, can be transferred. All churches must worship and evangelize, and they must embody discipleship through stewardship, fellowship and service. Those functions are transferable, though they look different in different cities. We work

hard to balance the global and local dimensions in our courses, and we are committed to partnering with the whole church, seeking alliances with Catholics, Orthodox and Protestants—the latter including mainline, evangelical, charismatic and independent Protestants.

We have a multiyear series of doctoral courses. We studied Catholic renewal movements in Europe two years ago, then Celtic spirituality in Iona last year. This year we are doing an Orthodox Trail series with the patriarchs in Istanbul and Bucharest, and next year we plan a Luther Trail series, with a week engaging ministries in Saxony and then a week in Berlin, all done jointly with European urban networks. The seminars we've done in Asia, Africa and Latin America have enabled us to see the value in the cross-fertilization of faculty and students from different cultures and continents.

### **What sparked your love for the city?**

My spiritual gifts while growing up as a rural Lutheran were milking and logging. For the church I grew up in, a cross-cultural experience was a Norwegian meeting a Swede.

A friend of my Sunday school teacher suggested that I attend Moody Bible Institute in Chicago. I'd never heard of it, but it was a way out of my valley. At Moody I fell in love with Chicago. After some time at Moody, I returned to Seattle to begin ministry and complete my college degree.

Boeing Corporation laid off many members of my congregation when it lost a contract, and so I began to see my need for studying cities and their politics. Then the civil rights movement and the struggle over the Vietnam war came along. For my M.Div. I attended Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, where I was a classmate of mission leader Orlando Costas and Sojourners founder Jim Wallis. I became committed to studying cities in scripture and church history.

I was further propelled by the shock of witnessing white flight and white fright in 1965 and the years following. I connected with a band of Chicago pastors who like me were searching for a theology as big as the city. I'd hoped to be a pastor to academics, but found myself pastoring the poor and learning from them. I discovered that the Bible is not a rural book after all. It begins in the garden but ends in the city. About 140 cities are mentioned in the text, and in both testaments there are about 1,250 references to a city or cities.

## **What are the chief barriers to doing urban ministry faithfully?**

I had an epiphany about those barriers as a result of a consultation with pastors in Cairo in 1982. Until then I'd assumed, partly out of my Chicago experience and academic studies, that urban pastors and missionaries needed better information and motivation to be more effective. But those Presbyterian pastors in the Synod of the Nile could invent ministry goals in Technicolor. They had great ideas about how to be more effective. When I divided them into small groups to see if they could identify the major barriers to their work, it turned out that nearly every barrier was *inside* their church, denominational or mission structure. The realities of the city were not their primary problem. Almost 90 percent of the barriers hampering urban ministry are found in the church's own ecclesial and mission structures.

## **You've spoken of how God may be using immigrants and refugees for evangelism. How is that happening?**

Frederick Norwood in his 1965 book *Strangers and Exiles: A History of Religious Refugees* argued that in the large scheme of God's mission, neither the Hebrew exiles in Babylon nor the Puritan exiles in Holland were victims. They were people of God on mission. All the greatest migrations in human history, especially the rural-to-urban waves that are happening on six continents, involve massive dislocations and injustices, which we cannot excuse or minimize. But the triune God is not surprised, and mission is happening in those streams of migration.

## **How would you apply that observation to the current debate over immigration in the U.S.?**

Psalm 24 reminds us that the whole earth is the Lord's. The U.S. has become the third-largest Spanish-speaking nation after Mexico and Spain. California is our first state with a non-Anglo majority. By the way, if you placed all 300 million Americans in California—and we had to live there together (God forbid!)—we'd still be less crowded than Japan.

Cornel West wrote in *Democracy Matters* of the vulnerability of white Americans. Fear reigns, and our politics reflects that fear. The American century is passing more quickly than we expected. Whites like me are about 13 percent of God's humanity, and that reality is just settling in among the churches. Mosques outnumber synagogues in many urban neighborhoods, and many Christians have not adjusted to that fact. The nations are in the neighborhoods now. Global mission is no longer

something that happens across the ocean; it happens across the street. Many of these new immigrants are building remarkable churches in cities all over the world. I saw that last year in Queens and Flushing, New York, where people from more than 130 nations live in the same zip code area, and where new churches are springing up and linking people to their home countries. It takes a kingdom perspective to appreciate this.

### **How should theological education evolve to address the challenges of the urbanizing world and globalizing church?**

Theological education all over the world is massively dependent upon third-party funding. Neither students nor churches are able or willing to pick up the costs of developing new leaders. What has been possible in the West until now is not possible at all in the global South, and yet cities in those regions are more than ever in need of creative and competent leaders.

For decades I have watched Western schools recruit foreign students. I think everyone now admits that more than half (perhaps up to 70 percent) of these students find reasons to stay in the West, or they leave their families here in the States when they go back. Some who go back need an expatriate's relatively high salary to pay their educational debt.

I sometimes lament the fact that so many Western-educated people with Ph.D.s teach outside the West, using funding from the West. Because of that practice, foreign schools with large numbers of expats on their faculty can keep tuition low for poor urban students. We Westerners assume that we are doing those schools a favor by sending these teachers, but the seminary can continue for decades hiding the real costs of theological education from its own constituencies. These dependencies are growing, not lessening, I fear. I also hear about seminary student spouses becoming pregnant so that they can give birth in the U.S. and so their babies can have American passports.

What we are trying to do at BGU is build the capacity of overseas urban seminaries through joint-ventured partnerships. Our family foundation, the Mustard Seed, currently underwrites scholarships for urban students in some 50 theological schools outside the U.S. We are trying to build the capacity of seminaries to recruit and retain their own students.

### **How does BGU structure its doctor of ministry program?**

I'm trying to find the Michael Jordans of urban ministry and ask them to tithe their time to teach. My goal is to turn cities into laboratories and turn urban practitioners into the next generation of professors. Because we rent a campus that's in the heart of a church and in the heart of a city, we are trying also to model the idea that the city is the campus, so that we can go up to the powerful and down to the powerless with equal integrity.

We have designed an all-African introduction to the program for French- and English-speaking students that will convene in Accra in 2009, South Africa in 2010, Addis Ababa in 2011 and possibly Alexandria in 2012. We are designing an Asian version that gets under way in Manila in 2010.

We use a common core of readings, but each syllabus focuses on the local culture as well. For students wishing to undertake work in church-based community or economic development, we use Manila, which is the best lab in the world for that. We are brokering faculty from seminaries and universities.

Every student must identify what we call a "personal learning community," which might be five people or, in one pastor's case, 200 (he had that many staff members at his 5,500-member church). Every paper the student writes is shared with the support group; that way the work really leads to a degree in ministry, not just a degree *about* ministry.

I'm trying to create partnership options for emerging leaders in cities around the world, and this can be done only if we link seminaries as creatively as businesses are being linked. Boeing no longer builds airplanes from scratch, but it does assemble them. And it builds airplane parts all over the world. If Boeing can do that, I fail to see why theological seminaries can't adapt to prepare leaders in an urban world—about 80 percent of which exists outside the West, where the traditional schools and resources are located.